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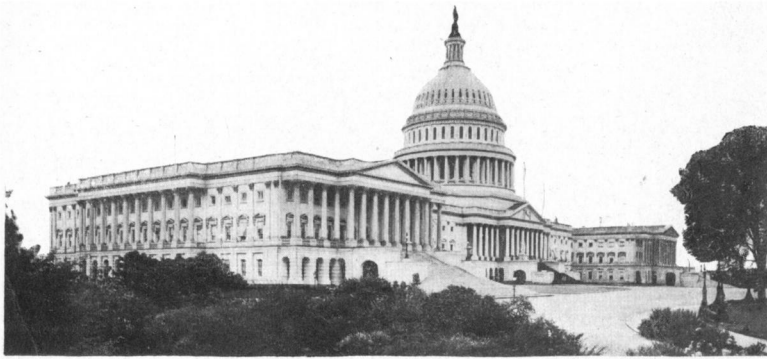
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# ART AND PROGRESS

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## FEDERAL BUILDINGS

BY MONTGOMERY SCHUYLER

### FIRST PAPER

**H**OW happy-go-luckily do we, nationally speaking, treat the question of public art! That is the moral that first of all impresses itself on one who undertakes to survey its past history or present status. No government on the Continent of Europe displays anything at all approaching our indifference. Individualism in the United Kingdom, indeed, has sometimes gone near to rivaling the indifferentism of individualism in the United States. In one instance it went further. There was a Briton named Ayrton, a generation ago, a kind of British "Uncle Joe," filled with great contempt for art in general, and for architects in particular, and holding that, whatever else an architect might be good for, he was the last man to consult when you had any-

thing to build. But the American holder of these enlightened views at least never got himself appointed a Commissioner of Works, as the British holder of them did, and had the opportunity of putting them into practice in some wonderful works, devised by his official draftsmen, and superintended by his official engineers. The most notable of them, perhaps, was the City of London Post Office, which finished him and his theories for the time.

It is a standing marvel how the Capitol came to be so good a building as it is. We do not deserve it. Really one must give the credit for the adoption of Thornton's design in great part to Washington, who disclaimed any knowledge of "the principles of architecture," and to Jefferson, who contrariwise claimed much.



CUSTOM HOUSE

BOSTON, MASS.

Dr. Thornton's own claim to be regarded as the author of the building, Mr. Glenn Brown, it is safe to say, has so vindicated that it will not again be challenged. But it is only fair to remember that the weight of such professional authority as there then was was against Thornton. On the other hand, the succeeding architects, Latrobe and Bulfinch, were the "leaders of the profession." It was quite true when Rufus Choate said it, it is too nearly true today, that "we have built no temple but the Capitol." And the extension, half a century later, was as lucky as the original nucleus. Nobody would pretend now that an open competition, under the direction of a select committee of the Senate, was a promising method of getting a good building. It was simply a marvel of good luck that the architect whose name came out of the wheel of this lottery should be, as he was, the inheritor and continuer of our best architectural tradition. Such, undoubtedly, was Thomas U. Walter, the "grand-pupil," so to speak, of one of the architects of the Capitol to be extended, being the pupil of Strickland, who was the

pupil of Latrobe, and being himself fresh from the success of Girard College, the only peripteral temple worthily carried out in monumental materials that we had then or have now. Mr. Walter could not complain of want of legislative appreciation for his labors. In fact one result of them was that he had more government work thrust upon him than he could do. He undertook the superintendence, as well as the design, of the General Post Office and of the extension of the Patent Office, but balked at having to superintend the execution of his design for the extension of the Treasury. It was in consequence of his refusal to be overloaded to this extent that there was appointed, in the person of Ammi B. Young, a "Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department," originally meaning nothing more than a supervising architect of the Treasury building. So entirely casual and incidental was the opening of

the direful spring

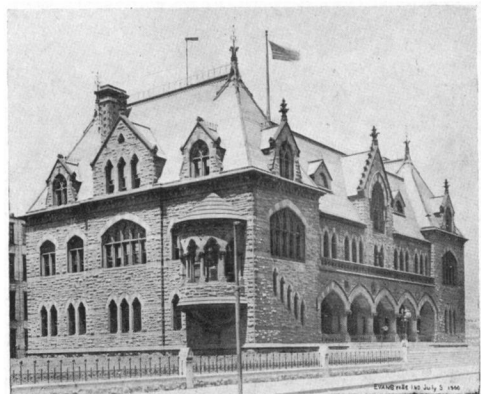
Of woes unnumbered.

There is, of course, no more reason why the public building should be assigned to

the Treasury Department than to any other. Not so much as why it should be assigned to the War Department, which in the Engineer Corps possesses experts in scientific if not in artistic building. The War Department had, in fact, the public building in charge, outside of Washington, for nearly or quite all the decade 1850-1860; Major Bowman of the Engineers was, in fact, the Supervising Architect. Naturally the public building was well and honestly and economically done. Naturally, also, it was marked by that degree of esthetic sensibility to be expected from a major of engineers. Under Major Bowman that golden age was in fact realized of which a member of Congress, ignorant of the realization, has lately dreamed aloud. There was a pattern adopted for all government buildings, with patterns also for additions in case of increased size and cost. All the conjoint custom houses and post offices that were built between 1855 and 1860, or thereabouts, were of this pattern, and no traveler who comes upon an example of the pattern needs to ask where the post office is. It is true that he may be a little doubtful about his own whereabouts when he comes, in Newark, N. J., let us say, apparently upon the same edifice which he has lately left in New Haven, Conn. This military and standardized public building seemed to be the worst thing that could happen. It was not until Supervising Architects with a passion for "variety" appeared that the mere monotony and dullness of the standardized edifice made themselves regretted and rose by contrast in the retrospect almost to alluring and artistic qualities.

The earliest supervising architects bore themselves meekly, it must be owned. The first of them, a graduate of Major Bowman's architectural military academy, Ammi B. Young, was not the worst of the architects of the Greek revival. His collaborator, collaborator at least in the Boston Custom House, and short-lived successor, Isaiah Rogers, was about the best. Nothing outrageous was to be apprehended from either of them, and no such thing came. Nothing even unconventional. But such luck could not last

forever. Rogers was succeeded, or superseded, by A. B. Mullett. It was not until the advent of Mr. Mullett that cultivated persons began to view the operations of the Supervising Architect with apprehension and alarm. For Mr. Mullett had a zeal for innovation which was not in the least according to knowledge. In fact, his successor said of him that he knew a little something of everything except architecture. But his honesty was unquestioned, his energy prodigious, and he was the kind of subordinate to commend himself to a Secretary of the Treasury who wanted to see the work done, and had no particular care or sense how, in an architectural sense, it was done. With Mr. Mullett's other qualities naturally went a tendency to magnify his office. He did institute a competition for the New York Post Office, a competition the terms of which were so unsatisfactory to the leading architects of that city that they declined to enter it. But, with the failure of the competition, instead of instituting another on more acceptable terms, he assumed the work to the office which he magnified. In the building at Washington for the State, War, and Navy, by experience bolder grown, he assumed the task of design without pretending to resort to competition or other mode of selecting an architect. The result was that he intruded, for the first time, the Mansard roof into the public architecture of the Capitol, and also, at one stroke, destroyed the scale of that architecture,



POST OFFICE

EVANSVILLE, IND.

which all his predecessors had respected. These were enterprising operations. And yet these two buildings are favorable specimens of his work, being, comparatively speaking, decent as well as tame. For his wilder work one has to "go West." The post office at Chicago was a specimen of it before, having passed through many architectural mutations, it was finally put out of its misery. And there are many more of Mr. Mullett's works still extant as wild as this, only not so big. Some of the biggest, as this Chicago building, and the like building in Boston, his successor was able to modify, to mitigate some of their asperities and to mellow some of their crudities. The difference between the tamer and the wilder was accounted for by the supposition that there was in the office of the supervising architect somebody of culture and training whom the supervising architect sometimes suppressed, but who sometimes circumvented him. But upon the whole, and even while Mr. Mullett was eliciting the eulogies of Senators as a great architectural genius, the architectural profession and the cultivated public had come to the conclusion that he was long past a joke, and, when Secretary Bristow superseded him with William Appleton Potter, there were few dogs to bark at his going.

The new Supervising Architect represented, and worthily represented, the prevailing way of thinking in his profession in the year 1875. He believed in and practiced Gothic, in the free, "eclectic," and Victorian phase. His best things were, and are, very good. Witness the post office at Evansville, Indiana. His worst were a distinct advance upon his predecessor's best. He had nothing very large to do, though at Chicago and at Boston, as has been said, he ameliorated the big things of his predecessor. But after all, perhaps the best service he rendered was in attempting to minify the office his predecessor had so persistently magnified. Nothing in his official life became him like the leaving it, leaving it of his own accord and giving as a reason that the place was impossible. His first and only official report was a vigorous protest against the system of designing public buildings into

which the United States had drifted. Nobody, he insisted, who was burdened with the enormous amount of routine work that fell to the lot of the Supervising Architect could possibly do justice to the enormous amount of designing which was also imposed upon that heavy-laden official. "I fail to do my whole duty if I remain inactive; for by some other system than that now obtaining much better, more artistic and worthy work can be done." Coming from the architect who had himself done so much better and more artistic work than had been done in it before, this protest was adapted to arouse public attention. The same year, in conjunction with Mr. Potter, a committee of the American Institute of Architects devised a measure creating a bureau of architecture, with an official to be known as the Government Architect as its head, by which the whole business of designing was taken away from that official, and his duties restricted to supervision and the arrangement of competitions under which the work of designing was to be awarded. But the project fell still-born. The time was not ripe. Sixteen years were to pass, and a vast accumulation of horrors of official architecture to be piled up before there was any change for the better.

A bill authorizing the President to appoint, with the advice and consent of the Senate, seven artists of repute as a Commission on Fine Arts, was passed by the House of Representatives on February 9th, after lengthy debate. This Commission will have authority to decide upon the location of statues and monuments in the District of Columbia, and is to advise in the selection of models and in the choice of artists.

The members of the Commission are to serve without pay, but \$6,000 are appropriated to cover traveling expenses and clerical service. The bill was introduced by Mr. McCall, chairman of the Library Committee of the House, and stoutly upheld by Mr. Cooper, of Wisconsin, and Mr. Slayden, of Texas. There is reason to believe that it will pass the Senate.